

From: Vanessa Craig, Director Area B

Re. Agenda Item 13.1, April 28 2020 RDN Board Meeting

## Summary:

- The RDN has a Parks Bylaw which is meant to protect park condition and ensure the continued enjoyment of RDN parks by our communities;
- Currently four parks, including the 707 Community Park, are not on the prohibited list of parks for homeless camping on Gabriola;
- The Fire Chief of the Gabriola Volunteer Fire Department is significantly concerned about the risk of fire in the 707 Community Park on Gabriola posed by a homeless camper (eg through smoking or using a fire or cookstove to heat food or themselves). Specific concerns include:
  - the park, which is larger than Stanley Park, is in the centre of the island and the fire hazard has been assessed as Extreme;
  - even after years of work in the park reducing fire risk and improving access, the park's current condition (e.g., dry forest, dense areas of growth and dead trees, piles of logging debris) remains a significant fire risk;
  - areas of the park are not accessible via firefighting equipment, and are outside cell coverage, which makes a coordinated emergency response more difficult;
  - in the event of a forest fire we will receive assistance from BC Wildfire; however, depending on time of day or weather condition, we might not receive assistance for hours;
  - No areas within the 707 have been identified as unsuitable for homeless camping outside of the 30 m buffer around parks infrastructure (limited to marked trails), even where sensitive ecosystems have been identified, or in areas at particularly high risk of fire where it will be difficult to mount an emergency response.

## Motion:

To address this I am requesting a temporary prohibition on homeless camping in the park until the park condition and fire risk has been assessed (likely by a professional such as a forester or a professional ecosystems biologist working in collaboration with the Fire Chief) and a report received with an assessment as to whether - based on fire risk and park condition - some or all of the park is unsuitable for homeless camping either temporarily or permanently. In addition, the report might include mitigation options to address fire risk in some or all of the park prior to removing the temporary prohibition on homeless camping – I am requesting that the prohibition remain until the mitigation options are implemented.

Below I provide information about the park as well as the challenges associated with a potential fire in the park.

## Background

### The 707 Community Park

- The 707 is a large park in the centre of Gabriola Island (Figure 1), which at ~422 ha in size is larger than Stanley Park (405 ha). The park is surrounded by residential areas, some of which are quite dense (for Gabriola). The park is connected via a trail on the north west edge to the main Village area of Gabriola.

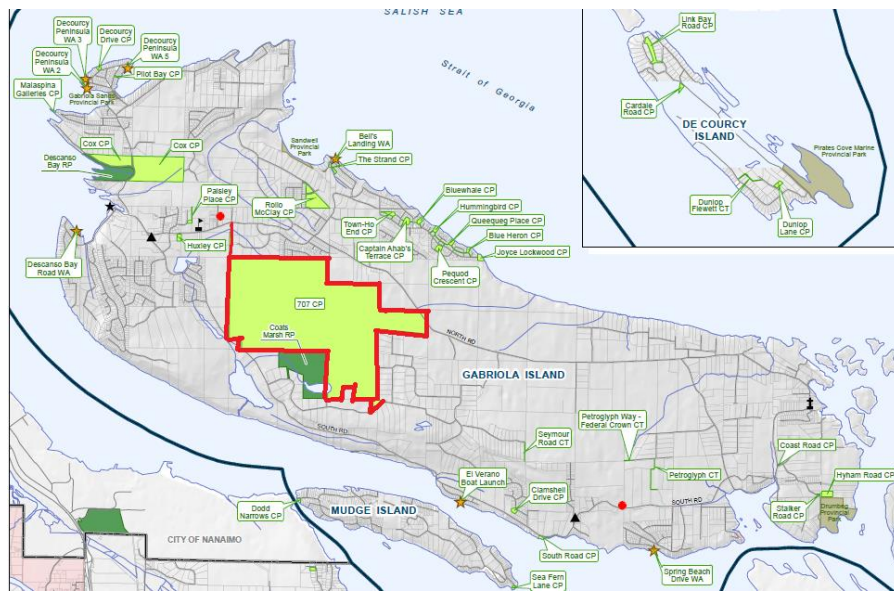


Figure 1. Community parks map of Gabriola with the 707 Community Park outlined in red. The park is connected via a trail at the northwest edge to the main Village area of Gabriola.

- In 2008 the fire risk on the island was assessed as part of a community wildfire plan (Strathcona Forestry Consulting 2008) – the area of the 707 park was assessed as Extreme fire risk (Figure 2).

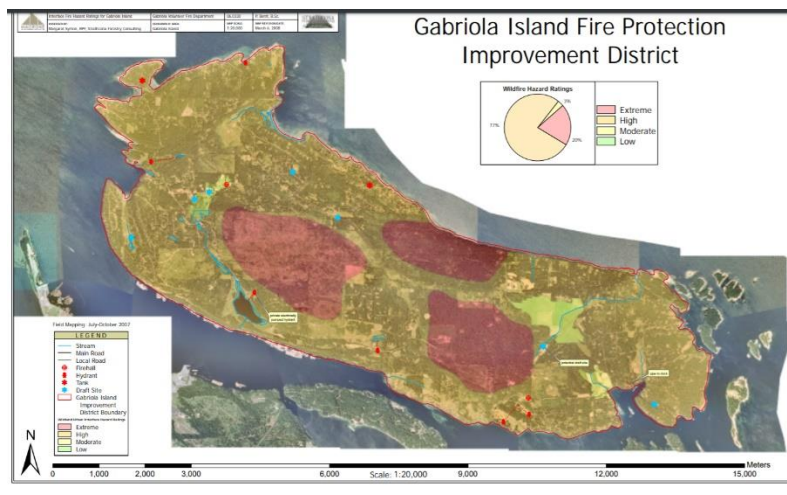


Figure 2. Map illustrating fire risk on Gabriola Island. The area of the 707 park (large red area in the centre west of the island) was assessed as Extreme.

- The 707 Community Park management plan is dated 2010-2020 and does not include the new part of the park that was added in 2018 (Figure 3 illustrates the area considered within the park management plan, which is smaller than the current park area illustrated in Figure 1). The management plan identifies some areas it considers to be sensitive ecosystems and identifies the importance of fire hazard reduction and emergency access. Although protection of sensitive ecosystems is mentioned in the Parks Bylaw, no areas within the park have been excluded from homeless camping based on that designation. Significant effort has gone into the park by the Gabriola Fire Department and RDN, as well as our local Gabriola Land and Trails Trust, to address fire risk and access in the park as well as other safety improvements (such as marked trails to aid in emergency response); however, the Fire Chief still considers the park to represent an extreme

fire hazard where a fire would be very difficult to contain given current park conditions as well as the risk that we might not receive immediate fire support from BC Wildfire.



Figure 3. The original management plan for the park was completed prior to the park addition. Within the original park plan several sensitive ecosystem areas were noted.

- Coats Marsh Regional Park is directly adjacent to the southwest edge of the 707 park (the dark green area in Figures 1, 3, and 4), and is considered a sensitive ecosystem because of the marsh. The new section of park includes a section of Coats Marsh (Figure 4) that extends across the regional/community park boundary.

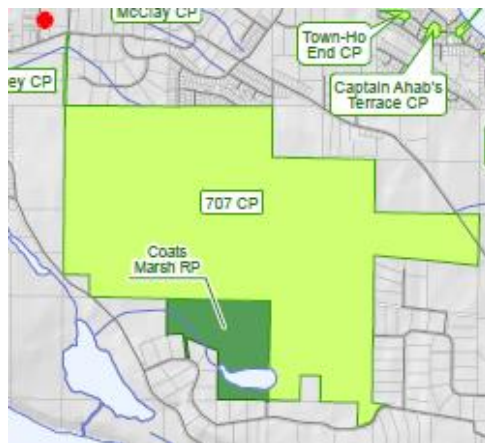


Figure 4. Close-up of the 707 Community Park (light green) and Coats Marsh Regional Park (dark green) showing the marsh extending in to the 707.

### Fire risk and emergency response in the 707

- The forest is largely dry Douglas-fir ecosystem.
- The area was harvested years ago (before becoming a park) and has been permitted to re-grow with few interventions, resulting in areas of dense regrowth and clumps of dead trees (pictures taken April 2020 by Gabriola Fire Chief).



- At the time of harvesting, debris was piled in slash piles, most of which still remain in the park. An attempt to burn a slash pile years ago resulted in the fire escaping and burning 2.5 ha before it was contained, after which the remaining slash piles were not burned for fear of another fire escape (pictures taken April 2020 by Gabriola Fire Chief). The fire risk associated with these slash piles is recognized in the management plan which indicates that slash piles should be assessed as part of a detailed fuel reduction prescription.



- Gabriola Island has unique and significant challenges with both enforcing the bylaw (due to the requirement for ferry travel for bylaw officers), and with addressing a fire that could start as a result of a homeless person camping in the 707 and using some sort of camp stove or fire to heat food/warm themselves.
- The Fire Chief has significant concerns about the potential of a fire in the park. The Gabriola Volunteer Fire Department has approximately 30 firefighters. Although well trained they have limited ability to attack and contain a forest fire in this park. The Fire Chief indicated that, in the event of a forest fire in the 707, the plan is to attack it as possible for an hour before pulling back

and focusing on protection of residences and/or evacuations (note the RDN report Item 7.3.1 on the Agenda being discussed at the Board meeting as well, which speaks to fire risk and evacuation planning on Gabriola).

- An important ongoing focus of the Fire Chief has been addressing fire risk within the park which has included fuel management as well as inviting BC Wildfire crews to work on the island each summer – a planned event for this summer has been cancelled due to the COVID-19 situation.
- A key concern of the Fire Chief is that we will not get supportive relief from Nanaimo or even BC Wildfire for a forest fire, depending on time of day and weather conditions. If a forest fire starts at night we will not receive support for hours. Similarly, in windy conditions assistance might be delayed.
- Areas in the park can be quite remote with no available road access in some areas to allow emergency access for firefighting or emergency response.
- There are significant challenges to communication – there is no cell coverage in significant areas of the park - which is an issue both for safety of responders and coordination of an emergency response.
- Finally, COVID-19 is a new threat. The issue of COVID-19 threat to fire response was recognized by the province in implementing their ban on category 2 and 3 open fires. This is a risk to our fire response as well – and the risk is increased by the fact that many of our firefighters are first responders. Currently the Fire Department has split into 3 platoons to give platoons quarantine time between on-call weeks, which means that only 10-11 firefighters are on duty at a time. While the province has implemented new regulations to limit first responder call-outs to only the most urgent calls and those where the ambulance can't arrive within 20 minutes, with only 1 ambulance on the island which leaves the island to transport patients (and is now required to transport all patients with respiratory symptoms directly to the hospital instead of transferring the patient at the Gabriola ferry terminal in Nanaimo), the likelihood of call-out is higher.

## Documents mentioned:

RDN map of Electoral Area B community parks <https://www.rdn.bc.ca/electoral-area-b-community-parks>

RDN. 2010. 707 Community Park Management Plan. <https://www.rdn.bc.ca/2019>

Strathcona Forestry Consulting. 2008. Community Wildfire Protection Plan: Gabriola Fire Improvement District, BC. <https://www.rdn.bc.ca/community-wildfire-protection-plans>